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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not a written, two-way home-school feedback program could be established on a regular basis. The study assessed the effectiveness of three feedback procedures for improvement of communication between parents of 600 middle school students involved in a Preparation through Responsive Educational Programs (PREP) project, and teachers of these students. Each grading period, written progress reports were sent to all parents. Parents were given opportunity to react to these reports. Postcard reminders and telephone calls were also used to increase communication. The researchers discovered that the most feasible feedback procedure was an interim report of student progress with a postcard reminder to parents. The researchers concluded that two-way communication between home and school, using simple, easily implemented procedures, is feasible. (Author/DS)

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Establishing and Assessing Two-Way Communication Between Parents and School

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Establishing and Assessing Two-Way Communication Between Parents and School

Many educators (Samuels, 1973; Karnes & Zehrback, 1975; Gilmore, 1974; Popp, 1973; Abbott, 1973; Cooke & Appolini, 1975; Larrick, 1976) are concerned about the lack of a mutual exchange of information between home and school. Some educators attribute this lack of two-way communication to a number of parent characteristics (Nelson & Bloom, 1973; Ayllon, 1975; Zwick, 1974). Family size, lack of transportation, low socioeconomic levels, living in rural areas, living in urban areas, uneducated parents, and parent anxiety about school are all cited as contributing to the lack of communication between teachers and parents. The schools themselves are also blamed (Pellegrino, 1973; Dinkmeyer, 1973). It is suggested that teachers and administrators call home only in times of crisis, and that school staff fail to keep parents informed and are satisfied with only token involvement from parents.

Mutual home-school communication has several distinct advantages: (a) teachers and parents can learn of each other's expectations for the students (Carberry, 1975; Goetz, 1974; Hill & Carlson, 1975), (b) parents can learn of their child's progress and can ask questions (Carlson & Hillman, 1975), and (c) children can see both parents' and teacher's interest (Hogan, 1975; Freman, 1975). Two-way communication, however, has traditionally been dependent on parents coming to the

school. Parents may attend PTA meetings, participate in volunteer activities, join parent-educational groups, or come to the school for parent-teacher conferences. When parents do not participate in these activities, educators usually rely on one-way communication from school to home, in the form of newsletters, bulletins, and report cards, as their main form of parental involvement with the school.

While many attempts have been made to improve the quality of one-way school-to-home communications through improved report cards (Giannangelo, 1975), use of a telephone answering device (Bittle, 1975), and use of a letter instructing parents to contingently reward their children for positive daily reports (Karraker, 1972), little has been done to implement two-way communication programs which do not require parents to come to the school.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not a written two-way, home-school feedback program could be established on a regular basis.

The feedback program was conducted within a large educational program. This program, Preparation through Responsive Educational Programs (PREP), is a large-scale applied research project designed to improve in-school and out-of-school performance of adolescents with academic and/or social skill deficits. PREP has been conducted in urban, rural, and suburban public schools, using regular school personnel as teachers and using project staff as research managers and teacher trainers. Academic instruction in English language,

reading, and mathematics is combined with training for social skills that are important for the student in school and community settings (see Cohen, Filipczak, Boren, Goding, Storm, Bishop, & Breiling, 1974; and Filipczak & Friedman, 1976, for a more detailed description of the PREP program).

Method

Subjects and Setting

The study operated in the 1975-76 school year within the context of the PREP Project at a middle school of 600 students in a lower socioeconomic status community near a major metropolitan city. The subjects were 68 seventh and eighth grade students who were participating in one of three components of the PREP program: social (N = 21), academic (N = 23), or both social and academic (N = 24). Those students in the social component participated in a social skills building class, while those students in the academic component participated in individualized English, reading, and math classes. For the remainder of the seven class periods a day the students all attended regular school classes. Of the students' parents, 17% had only elementary school education, 6% had junior high schooling, 72% had at least some high school education, and 5% had some college experience. Parent participation in school events was typically low. Teachers frequently complained that parents did not come to the school. None of the PREP families lived within walking distance of the school.

Procedure

To initiate two-way communication with parents, individual reports on the progress of each student in PREP classes were sent to the parents after completion of approximately the middle week of classes in each of the four marking periods. Students in the social skills component received a report on one subject, those in the academic component received a report on three subjects, and those in both components received a report on four subjects. The first marking period report gave the total number of assignments given in each PREP subject and the number of assignments the student had completed at 80% or better criteria. A chart was included for converting the number of assignments completed to a grade equivalent. The second, third, and fourth marking period reports gave the grade earned so far in the marking period for each PREP subject, but did not include specific information about the number of assignments completed. These three reports also contained a brief description of each of the PREP classes.

Insert Figure 1 about here

All four reports included the students' attendance record, the homework requirements for each subject, and specific teacher comments. Each teacher in each of the PREP classes wrote at least one comment for every student for all four marking periods. With each set of

progress information mailed to parents, a form was included on which the parents were asked to indicate their reaction to their child's performance. For each class on which progress was reported, parents were asked to check any of the following:

- I am pleased with this report. (Please explain below)
- I am not pleased with this report. (Please explain below)
- I have some questions about this report. Please call me.

Space was provided for comments for each class. Students returned the completed forms to the school. The forms were then reviewed by the teachers.

During the first marking period, postcards were sent to parents reminding them to return their comments. Phone calls were also made to parents, either to interview them about their reactions to the interim report or to urge them to return their comments. During the second, third, and fourth marking periods, no interview or prompting calls were made, in order to test procedures that could feasibly be carried out by most schools. The postcard reminders were sent during the second and fourth marking periods. During the third marking period, to assess the degree to which parents wanted the interim report, a letter was sent to parents asking them to return an enclosed self-addressed, stamped postcard if they wanted to receive the report. No postcard reminders were sent.

Results

Table 1 shows the percentage of parents returning the attached form for each of the four marking periods by grade and section of PREP.

Insert Table 1 about here

The lowest return occurred during the third marking period when parents had to request the report in order to receive it and when no postcard reminders were sent. While there was no difference in the percentage of forms returned as a function of grade, there was a significant relationship (x^2 (2) = 8.53, $p < .02$) between program components and whether or not parents returned the form. The parents of the students receiving the report for just the one social skills class tended to return less forms than did the parents of students in the other two program components.

The percentage of parents who returned the forms and who also wrote comments on them for each of the four marking periods was 79%, 93%, 91%, and 92%, respectively ($\overline{X}$ = 88%). Eighty percent of the parents indicated that they were pleased with their child's report, while 18% were not pleased, and 2% had questions about the report. Fifty-six percent of all parents returned the forms for either three or four of the four reports, 76% returned the form at least twice, and 13% did not return it at all.

Sixty-nine percent of the parents requested the third interim

report. The percent of parents requesting the report in each program component was: both 79%, academic 64%, and social 62%. Forty-three percent of the parents who requested the report returned the form.

Table 2 illustrates both the time lag involved in completing the cycle of two-way communication and the consistency in the rate at which the forms were returned. On the first day that students began bringing back the forms, approximately one-fourth of all the forms that were going to be returned were returned. Within two weeks (ten school days), approximately 94% of all forms that would eventually be returned were in.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 3 compares the classroom performance of students whose parents requested the reports with that of students whose parents did not request them. The table shows the percent of English, math, and reading assignments completed the week prior to and the week after the report was sent. The change in percent of assignments completed differed significantly (X^2 (1) = 6.08, $p < .02$) for students whose parents requested the report.

Insert Table 3 about here

Phone interviews conducted with 42 of the 53 parents who returned the form in the first marking period indicated that in 88% of the homes both the mother and father received the report, all parents were pleased to get the reports, and 93% of them had shown the report to the child.

Discussion

In general, the interim reports were a successful means of establishing two-way communication between parents of lower socioeconomic status and the school. Parents showed that they were interested in their child's progress and wanted to be involved in their child's schooling by the frequency with which they returned the forms and by the high percentage of parents who wrote comments in addition to checking off their reply. These results were especially encouraging, since previous efforts by PREP staff to involve other parents (of similar background) at the same school in parent-education training had resulted in approximately 13% attendance at the meetings. The larger return of parent forms from the academic and both components than from the social skills component may indicate that parents found the report more useful when it provided information about more subjects.

Parents indicated that they were happy to get the reports not only on the returned forms but also on a questionnaire given at the end of the year to evaluate the PREP program. Of the 45 parents (68%) returning the questionnaire, 81% checked that the interim reports helped very much.

Preliminary investigation shows a relationship between teacher comments on the interim report and parental response. For example, during the first marking period, in 40 of 41 cases (98%) where a teacher gave a grade of B and also wrote a positive comment, parents were pleased with the report. In 9 out of 13 cases (69%) where a grade of B was given and a negative comment was made, parents were not pleased. Similarly, in all seven cases of a C or D grade accompanied by a positive teacher statment, parents were pleased. In only 13 of 30 cases (43%) where a C or D grade was given and a negative comment was made were the parents pleased. In general, there is some indication that parent response may have been more related to teacher comments than to grade. This preliminary finding has implications for teachers, since positiveness on the part of teachers seems to produce positiveness from parents.

The procedures used during the second and fourth marking periods demonstrated that a relatively simple process of written information and feedback, mailed from the school and hand-carried back by students, could establish two-way communication. Moreover, the more time-consuming procedures of the 1st marking period did not yield a significantly greater proportion of returned comments. The third marking period procedures showed that parents wanted the school information, but also suggests that requiring parents to request the report is not totally effective in establishing two-way communication. The communication tended to stop once the parents received the reports. It is

difficult to determine whether the low return rate was a function of requiring parents to request the report or a function of not sending the postcard reminder. It would be useful to further assess the effects of the postcard reminder on the return rate of parents' comments.

In conclusion, while the interim reports were generally effective in establishing two-way communication, they also at times tended to be somewhat inefficient. In order for the reports to be sent, efforts had to be coordinated between seven teachers. Depending on how quickly the teachers could fill out the reports, they were sent to parents anywhere from the first to the fourth school day after the close of the midterm grading period. In addition, the time it took by mail (usually two days) for the reports to reach parents, and the amount of time that passed before parents returned the forms contributed to the time lag in completing the cycle. So that, while two-way communication was achieved with a large percentage of parents, it took from two to three weeks after the close of the grading period for the cycle to be completed.

In addition to determining that a two-way communication could be established between home and school using relatively simple procedures, another finding was a significant relation between requesting the report and change in percent of work completed. This finding indicates that giving parents an opportunity to request information and providing the information when it is requested may affect the

amount of work the students complete. While these preliminary results are encouraging, further empirical testing is needed of the relationship between amount and type of home and school communication and academic progress.

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Table 1

Percent of Parents Returning Form

	MARKING PERIOD				
	1	2	3*	4	
	Automatic Report Post Card Reminder Phone Calls	Automatic Report Post Card Reminder	Parents Must Request Form	Automatic Report Post Card Reminder	$\bar{X}$
GRADE:					
7th	75%	64%	46%	59%	62%
8th	84%	61%	40%	55%	60%
COMPONENT:					
Both	79%	64%	43%	68%	64%
Academic	91%	71%	50%	62%	70%
Social	60%	52%	33%	34%	48%
ALL STUDENTS	79%	63%	43%	57%	61%

*These figures represent the percent return for only those parents who requested the forms.

Table 2

Cumulative Percent of Forms Returned by Parents

MARKING PERIOD	SCHOOL DAY				
	1	4	7	10	12
1	25%	66%	96%	100%	100%
2	24%	62%	90%	93%	100%
3	23%	50%	86%	86%	100%
4	23%	57%	83%	97%	100%

Table 3

Total Percent of English, Math, and Reading Assignments

Completed at 80% Criteria (3rd Marking Period)

	PARENTS REQUESTED REPORT			PARENTS DID NOT REQUEST REPORT		
	7th Grade	8th Grade	Total	7th Grade	8th Grade	Total
Before Report (Week 5)	54%	59%	56%	51%	69%	61%
After Report (Week 7)	66%	73%	69%	43%	70%	58%

Figure 1

PREP Academic Report

Dear _____:

Here is a report of how your child, _____ ____, has been doing for the first five weeks of this marking period (through March 4th). Grades in PREP classes are earned by the number of assignments done. We hope this report is helpful, and we would like to hear how you feel about it. Please fill out the attached form and have your child return it tomorrow to the PREP office. If you have any questions or other comments, you can reach the PREP teachers and staff by calling 730-5835.

READING TEACHER: Mrs. Brotman

Assignments are 4 exercises in which the student reads a paragraph or a chapter and writes answers to questions and one group lesson each week.

So far, your child's grade is _____.

Homework: There are four homework assignments per week.

Comments: _____

ENGLISH TEACHER: Mr. Brook

Assignments are 2 spelling exercises, a spelling pre-test and a spelling test, 2 grammar exercises, reading and answering questions from a student magazine, and a creative writing assignment per week.

So far, your child's grade is _____.

Homework: There are two written spelling assignments and one written grammar assignment each week. Wednesday is the night to study spelling words for the test Thursday.

Comments: _____

MATH TEACHER: Mrs. Zlamal

Assignments are math exercises and/or passing tests at 80% correct and 1 group lesson.

So far, your child's grade is _____.

Homework: Homework is given on the average 2 times a week.

Comments: _____

ATTENDANCE

Your child was present _____ days.

Your child was present _____ % of the time.

This is GOOD FAIR POOR attendance.